

Stage Manager: The Best Friend a Singer Can Have

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They sit at the table with score, notepad, and reams of paperwork. Rehearsals start and end on their word. They can be the kindest or most stern people you have ever met, but they are an invaluable resource. The best ones are there because they enjoy creating an environment where performing artists can do their finest work and have to worry only about performing. Many of them are singers or instrumentalists in their own right. What brings them to the table are often the same things that bring you to the stage; a love of the art form and of live theater. I am speaking of the stage manager.

The stage manager can be the singer's best ally. According to soprano Brenda Harris, "My advice to beginning singers is to ALWAYS make friends of stage management. They can make OR break your job experience." They hold vast amounts of information about the production, the schedule, the company, and often the city in which you are performing. Establishing a good relationship with the stage manager can make your performing experience much nicer.

The role of the stage manager varies from company to company. The majority of opera companies in America do not have a resident stage manager. Like the singers, stage managers are usually contracted. However, many stage managers have their "circuit" of companies for which they work, so they tend to know the cities and companies very well. They usually arrive from one to seven days before the cast. During this time, they tape the floor in the rehearsal hall, prepare contact sheets, start to organize the schedule, and get the all-important coffee and tea service ready.

The function of the stage manager is one of service, not servant. While they usually arrive early enough for rehearsal to prepare coffee and tea in addition to the rehearsal hall, they are not there to clean up after the cast. Each stage



David Grindle, stage manager, prepares for Atlanta Opera's 2001 production of *Otello*.

manager has his or her own version of the "I am not your mother" speech. However, the best casts are the ones who don't need that. If you would like to endear yourself to the stage manager, clean up after yourself in rehearsal.

Most companies today hire at least a team of two stage managers, a production stage manager (PSM) and an assistant stage manager (ASM). This allows some division of labor as they document and prepare the show for production. The ASM will generally take responsibility for either props or costumes (sometimes both), while the PSM is responsible for scenery placement, light cues, and schedules.

Some small companies hire only one person, and that person has a huge burden to bear.

Scheduling of rehearsals is a major part of the stage manager's job. Making sure the entire show has been rehearsed, everyone has had their breaks, and everything is running on time falls on the stage manager's shoulders. Generally, a company will have one particular day of the week assigned as the day off. If so, this is usually announced at the start of rehearsal. In addition to rehearsals, stage managers also schedule your PR interviews, costume fittings, wig fittings, and other of schedule at any time. This is simply because schedules are always changing. Check with the stage manager about how to get updates. I often had an answering machine or voice mail with the next day's schedule recorded on it. This allowed artists and staff to call a particular extension to check for their next calls. Keep this number with you if such a service is provided.

The stage manager, or assistant director (if the production has one), is the person dutifully charged with recording the blocking for the cast. The production book is where all of this is recorded. If you have blocking questions and would like to look at the book, ask to see it. That's what it's there

for. However, don't remove the production book from the table. Every stage manager has nightmares of losing their production book. Even taking it over to ask the director a question is enough to strike fear in the heart of most stage managers. The entire show is recorded there, so, please refer to it as often as you need, but please don't remove it from its place. The blocking notes are usually taken in shorthand, but a stage manager will be happy to translate for you. It is usually something you can pick up quickly once you learn their style of notation.

Be aware that the production table is not the place to deposit your bags. When I am stage managing, I try to make an area for artists' personal effects. Often, the production table is a six-foot space shared by the stage manager and the director, each of whom need large amounts of information available to them at a moment's notice. This is why you often see the production table covered in file folders, schedules, and production books (all neatly arranged, of course). If you need a place to put your personal items, ask the stage manager.

Another responsibility of the stage manager is to know where all cast members called to a rehearsal are at any time. Murphy's law of rehearsal says that the moment you step out of the rehearsal hall without telling the stage manager is the exact moment the director or conductor will ask for you. A simple acknowledgment to any member of the stage management staff that you are stepping out saves a moment of searching when you are needed.

Most stage managers these days carry cell phones. Make sure you carry the cell phone number of the stage manager

with you and that you have given them your number in return. If you are late to rehearsal, a phone call to the stage manager can explain why you aren't there as scheduled. Unless you call to let the rehearsal staff know that you're stuck in traffic, there is nothing to prevent them from thinking you are stopping for coffee.

Quick tips for good singer/stage manager relationships:

- Always be 10-15 minutes early to rehearsal and wave to a stage manager to let them know you are there.
- Don't try to hide illness. The stage manager will find out and end up having to take you to the doctor anyway.
- If you want to copy down blocking after staging, ask to see the book — it's all in there.
- Clean up after yourself. This includes newspapers, coffee cups, etc.
- Turn your cell phone off when you go to rehearsal.
- If you use inhalers or epi-pens, tell the stage manager where you keep yours in case of emergency.
- Carry the stage manager's phone number — they are always on call.
- Don't call at unreasonable hours unless it's an emergency.
- Don't assume that because you told the director a prop or costume doesn't work that the stage manager will find out.
- Enjoy your performance. A good stage manager gets great joy from that alone.

If there is no company manager where you are working, the stage manager is often your best guide to things you need in town. If they don't know the answer, they can either find out or direct you to someone who knows. If you are sick, the stage manager can direct you to a pharmacy or put you in contact with the company physicians. Often, they can work with people to get you an appointment, even when the schedule is supposedly full. However, if they don't know you are sick, they can't help you.

Once a show moves to the theater, the duties of the stage manager multiply. Not only are they coordinating the activities of the cast, stage crew, and costuming crew, they also remain your resource. Especially in this busy time, the call board is the primary outlet for information, including call sheets, schedules, and sign-ins. Check the call board at

the beginning and end of each rehearsal; it will keep you informed.

A word about sign-ins: Most theaters are cavernous compared to the rehearsal hall. In a rehearsal hall, the stage manager can look around and see if everyone is there, but this is an impossible task in the theater. To save time and sanity, the stage managers rely on the sign-in sheet for

attendance. If you are stopping by to drop stuff off and then going to dinner before your call, don't sign in until you arrive to stay. Once you have signed in, stay in the theater.

The stage manager continues to be an important source of information in the theater, as are the assistant stage managers who supervise the deck and make sure everyone and everything gets on stage. If you need to talk to a stage manager, remember that they have people talking to them over headset all night. They will get to you as quickly as possible, but they do have to talk back to the voices in their heads, so to speak.

That said, don't be afraid to communicate important information. If your props aren't in the right place, tell the stage manager. If they don't know, chances are the error won't be corrected. Remember, the crew is just learning the show: They have never seen the show and probably don't know the story. The stage managers are teaching them what needs to happen, so be patient; they will be up to speed very quickly. A good crew will have the set changed and your costume changed before you know what has happened, but they do need time to learn.

The stage management team works long hours in rehearsal and even longer hours during the time in the theater. During the day, the stage manager sits with the lighting designer and director in the house while each moment of the show is lit. The ASM spends the day on stage "walking" the blocking so that the design team can see a person in the light they are designing for you. The stage managers are also updating the running information for the crew. All of this happens so that when you come to rehearse, everything is ready and waiting for you.

During the show, the stage manager is focused on what is happening next. This includes your entrance. Unlike in spoken theater, the stage manager will page you to the stage. This is usually done five to seven minutes before you enter, so you can get to the stage without rushing. Once you get to the stage, let the stage manager or assistant in charge of that particular side know that you

are there. This lets the stage manager have a mental check-off that you are ready to go on. And once you are there, don't leave. While calling a dress rehearsal of *La traviata* once, the singer playing the gardener showed up for his entrance and then disappeared, leaving the letter that he was to take on stage. I grabbed the letter, walked out, sang his one line, and walked off. The director was not happy and neither was I. The singer had decided to run back to his dressing room while my back was turned. In the end, it was I who got yelled at because I had "lost" the singer. Please don't do this to your stage manager.

Calling a show is an art in and of itself. Just as you wouldn't want to be interrupted while singing, think about what the stage managers are doing when you go up to them. The moment when the candle is about to be blown out in Act I of *La bohème* is not a good time to ask a question, because there is almost always a difficult light cue at that moment. Keep in mind that everything the audience sees happens because a stage manager says, "Go." Don't be offended if they ask you not to speak during a section of the show that is difficult for them.

Just like you, your stage manager is likely to be living out of a suitcase. While we are the first ones in to rehearsal and the last ones to leave, we do like to do things in our rare off time. I have often been asked to arrange outings for the cast. I have done catfish dinners, movies, and amusement parks. However, the best outing I went on was one the cast had arranged and invited me to join. Remember your stage manager as part of the company when everyone is going out; it is a great way to show them you appreciate their work.

Stage managers provide an important service to the opera company as a whole. The best ones do the work with a smile and with pleasure. They ensure that your props are waiting for you, your costume change is prepped, and that there is even water available for a quick drink before you go on stage. Most of them have a healthy respect for what it takes to be a singer. Take the time to watch them work, and you will most likely develop that same respect toward them. ♦